

CONTEXT IS CONTENT... CONTENT IS CONTEXT

Nam June Paik

Good Morning/Bonjour M. Orwell was a collective effort by many artists and managers. Sometimes they risked their careers for this business. I cannot be more grateful for their co-venture. And for their sake, I feel obliged to set the balance sheet right.

AESTHETIC PRINCIPLE

The distance between live satellite TV and 'established Video art' is as far apart as the distance between 'established Video art' and film art. In established Video art, we are able to employ many powerful new techniques which are not available to the traditional filmmaker: instant video-synthesis, repetition at no cost, CMX editing (which allows us to go down ten generations, yet recover the original quality in no time), and a thousand possibilities in exact keying, matting, superimposition, wiping, ADO, Quantel Mirage, etc. Of course, these virtues do exist in similar film technique, but at prohibitive cost both in dollars and time. When we compare film art to video installation, our technical ease is beyond comparison. We have liberated ourselves from narrative structure. At long last, John Cage's dream (. . . to make music without beginning or end. . .) has become common sense. Simply, it IS (by definition) ontologically impossible to make boring video installations. Audiences can leave at any time. . . and they do leave to live.

What do we gain by sacrificing the above virtues with live satellite TV? The answer is found in the same reason why people shop at Korean vegetable stands, avoiding canned food. . . because vegetables are fresh with

VITamins. . .

VITA. . . life itself.

Quite a few video critics who are friendly to me, deplored the lack of certain kinds of aesthetic quality which they expect from 'conscientious' film/video art, such as good editing, social meaning, in-depth study of performance art, metaphor, profundity, etc. I agree with them, too. Certainly the show was full of loopholes, both avoidable and unavoidable mistakes. . . however, these defects do not explain why at least five million people around the world sat through the 60 minute program. (I base this figure on the 45 minute rating in New York and Germany, which was a share of 2. Sometimes PBS shows are below one; that is, unmeasurable.) If you sit through sixty minutes of a show which has neither plot nor sex/violence, that is a sign of strong approval or interest. Not only did the audience have 20 alternative channels, but, at the same time, both the CBS and NBC networks were showing NFL football. Besides, January One is a busy time for families, friends and long distance telephone calls! Also, the show's defects do not explain why the closed-circuit showing at the Kitchen was filled six times a day for 30 days in an unusually cold winter. The Kitchen management was flabbergasted by this SUSTAINED popularity, which was made possible ONLY through word of mouth communication, not by mass communication.

We must have done something right, which we haven't discerned yet. The Newness comes in 1000 disguises. . . Many little sweetnesses lurk in unexpected corners at decent intervals. . . like on a honeymoon trip.

NY-Paris, installation by Nam June Paik at the Kitchen, New York City. PHOTO: KERI PICKETT



UNION PROBLEM

Generations of intellectuals fought for the unionization of workers. Sometimes their heads got cracked. If they were lucky, only their promising careers as lawyers, doctors or administrators were truncated. However, when workers gained power, intellectuals got paid in reverse. . . from Trotsky to the hippies (who were beaten up by the construction union in the Seventies). I understand that de-unionization is a trend in the Silicon Valley. Must we wait until the de-unionization of the American airwaves. . . say. . . in 30 years? I will be 82 years old. John Cage will be 102, Beuys 93 years old. . .

At least we will be in the same generation. . . here or there.

DOUGLAS DAVIS AND GEORGE PLIMPTON

Douglas Davis and the Kit Galloway/Sherry Rabinowitz team are artists who work almost EXCLUSIVELY with satellites. Doug Davis initiated the Documenta satellite and in 1977 achieved one-way broadcasting from Kassel to New York and Venezuela. He also tried a two-way satellite transmission, Kassel to Venezuela, which failed due to a 500.000 DM shortfall. Naturally, I wanted to honor his pioneering achievement in my program. However, Centre Pompidou had realized an hour-long two-way satellite piece with the Whitney Museum a couple of years ago (*in memoriam* to Roland Barthes), and therefore the Pompidou side did not want to repeat themselves after so short a time. At the WNET side, we pondered the nature of Douglas Davis, which is of a profound sort. I agree with noted critics Pierre Restany and Jim Harithas that the Documenta satellite/Doug Davis performance was far superior to my own. However, in this show, Beuys was also going to do a profound performance, and we could not afford two profound performances in one show. In this hit or miss kind of situation (live show), we have to spread out the risk factors and make a smorgasbord of possibilities. Therefore, I did not fight too much for the inclusion of Davis, yet I emphasized his role in the newspaper interviews so that he received the proper credit. As for Kit Galloway and Sherry Rabinowitz, we adapted their cross-country feedback into Merce Cunningham's trans-Atlantic feedback and did credit them at the end. (Sorry the credits were so small.) They were magnificent at the rehearsal but somebody pushed the wrong button during the real thing. . . *c'est la vie*. . . or. . . we will soon have a new expression "*c'est la satellite*".

Our satellite show *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* was lopsidedly male oriented. . . we had only three women stars compared to 10 male stars. Therefore I had thought of a woman host. . . yet, even if Nastassia Kinsky had come to us, we most likely would not have accepted her, since being a host is not easy. . . one must be an expert in literature (Orwell being a writer), and speak well on TV. In this sense, Plimpton did fit the requirements and he did his job well. . . especially his impromptu encounter with Charlotte Moorman, which was mellow and juicy.



Allen Ginsberg and friends, production still from *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell*.

NEUSS, GERMANY

P.S. (an excerpt from my report to Centre Pompidou on Jan 30 84)

Is LIVE TV An Indispensable Part of High Art?

If video art remains an inexpensive copy of FILM art, we don't need a LIVE show. If we want only to deliver only cost-efficient entertainment on TV, we don't need LIVE TV. However, we want to develop video art not only as a high art, but as the HIGHEST art form human-kind has invented. As the *miracle* is the cornerstone of every major religion in the world, *oneness* constitutes the very motor of human history. Important things happen only once in our lives and they are neither repeatable nor reversible — death, defloration, birth (where, when, in which social milieu). Through LIVE video art, we are finally able to deal very concretely with the central problems of human existence (chance, hazard, bet, venture). Pascal and Sartre would be very jealous of video artists!!! We can even encode their metaphysics in popular entertainment as we did on January First. In the very particular time-frame and mind-frame of January One, at high noon, the wavelengths of two million Americans, one million Europeans (in France, both East and West Germany, Belgium, Denmark, and Holland) and one million Koreans were united in sync. The immortals of our time (Beuys, Cage, Cunningham, Allen Ginsberg, Laurie Anderson, Tinguely-Saint Phalle's garden, etc.) met in ELECTRONIC SPACE! Their souls were superimposed and etched into four million brains and eternalized in the videotape. (The show gained 1-2 million more through telecasts in Spain, Yugoslavia and repeats at PBS in the USA.) If the immortalization of the immortals is the prime function of a museum, the Centre Pompidou could not better fulfill its function than through *Good Morning Mr. Orwell*, because the fragile nature of performing artists requires a special kind of curatorship. This *Essentia* is, historically speaking, much more important than a few points in the Nielsen Ratings. □

(Editor's note: Nam June Paik has assembled the best parts of the original French and American transmissions into a new, 37-minute edit. *Orwell, Revised* has been exhibited at the World's Fair in New Orleans and at the 1984 San Francisco International Video Festival.)